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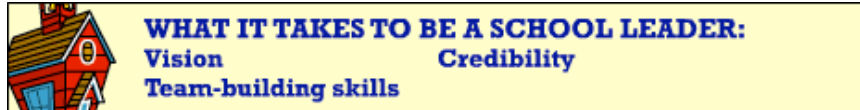


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VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

Teaching Religion in Public Schools: Removing the Angst

SHARE ARTICLE

Do you run from any mention of religion in your public school classroom? How do you escape that during this month of holy celebrations? Educator Max Fischer has been thinking about this issue, and his thoughts might help relieve some of your angst. **Included: Fischer shares a few approaches to teaching about world religions.**

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE



Max W. Fischer

In a businesslike manner the parent addressed me over the phone: "When I was helping Johnny with his homework last night I was taken aback that the answers to his work included terms like God, the Old Testament, and the Ten Commandments. I thought public schools couldn't teach those topics."

Then, in a skeptical tone -- one that might have been reserved for dealing with a used car salesman -- she added, "Explain to me what's going on here."

For many public school teachers, social studies instructors included, teaching about religion is a daunting task. Many gladly would opt to cover afternoon bus duty during a week of a full moon rather than tackle this parent's pointed inquiry.

"RELIGION" SHOULDN'T BE A DIRTY WORD

Media reports of courthouse controversies involving school prayer, the posting of the Ten Commandments, and ACLU challenges to Nativity scenes on public squares -- coupled with challenges about the types of music the school choir is permitted to present during the

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holiday season -- often skew rational thought about the importance of teaching about religion. Even if a teacher wanted to make a valid presentation about religion, the burning question of "How?" often is a stumbling block.

classroom experience that opened your eyes? Click [here](#) to learn more.

Religion shouldn't be a dirty word in public education.

The very court that terminated the act of organized prayer in public school in this country in the 1960's also stated the foundation for the teaching of religion in the public classroom. Supreme Court justice Tom Clark from that very bench remarked in the case of *Abington vs. Schempp* that...

"It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities."

The critical barometer in the instruction of religion in public education lies in this point: The educator must be teaching *about* religion and not *promoting* or *celebrating* one religion over another.

A SUBJECT FOR COMPARATIVE STUDY

For the past five years, I have taught ancient western civilizations to seventh graders. In our state's social studies curriculum the comparative study of various religions is encouraged much as stated by Justice Clark. The foundations of early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are studied in my class. Following are some of the approaches I have employed with regard to teaching those major religions:

Copying excerpts of the Old Testament for student comprehension exercises.

Isn't this an attempt to sneak the Judeo-Christian ethic in through the back door? Not really. Having previously studied Hammurabi's Code, the samplings of Hebrew law from Exodus and Deuteronomy are designed to show linkage to the Babylonian legal system.

The posting of the Ten Commandments.

Didn't the courts rule those cannot be posted in public buildings? They cannot be posted on a *permanent* basis out of concern they would be construed as an endorsement of a religion. However, within a classroom for a specific period of time to coincide with legitimate instruction involving the Ten Commandments' place in history, such a posting is legal.

Watching a video about and reading the parable "The Good Samaritan."

How can a public school teacher teach Sunday school lessons? While establishing that the basis of Christianity was Jesus' teaching of loving one another as one's self, such a presentation of the Christian gospel is permissible. My standing in front of class passionately urging students to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal savior would be promoting a religion and unacceptable.

Having a Muslim speaker present the basic beliefs of Islam.

Are religious oriented speakers allowed in public schools? Recently, I had a college student from Pakistan give a PowerPoint presentation on the Five Pillars of Faith within the Islamic religion. His purpose was to give a factual account of Islamic beliefs and how that belief system affects the lives of practicing Muslims. His goal was not to (nor did he) exhort the audience to convert to Islam.

Major research papers on Jesus, the Apostle Paul, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad.

How can a teacher demand papers on specific religious figures? An end-of-the-year research assignment invites students to select *any* topic from the scope of our four millennia curriculum on which to report. All of those topics were perfectly legal because students *chose* them. On the other hand, a

teacher mandated report on Jesus (or Muhammad, or Moses, and so on) for each student could be problematic.

A WELL ROUNDED EDUCATION IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

In a well-rounded education in our ever more diverse society, an objective study of the world's various belief systems is essential. Religion, through the ages, has at times been simultaneously a unifying as well as divisive agent. On the very day I write this column, it's reported in the local newspaper that the FBI noted a 1600 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslims in 2001 compared to 2000. While that figure is obviously attributable to the events of September 11, 2001, it serves to highlight the need for educational exposure to the different spiritual natures of mankind in an ever-shrinking world in a technological age.

Author Note:

There are many more sides to this issue that can't be covered due to limited space in this column. For more information, you might wish to review [Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools](#) on the Web site of the Freedom Forum. While the entire document may be downloaded, Chapter 6, "A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools," gives a most pragmatic overview of how religious instruction can be constitutionally instituted.

A teacher for nearly three decades, Max Fischer currently teaches seventh graders the marvels of ancient history. A National Board certified teacher in the area of early adolescence social studies/history, Max has authored nine resource books for teachers in the fields of social studies, health, and math. You can read a previously published article about Fischer: [Simulations Engage Students in Active Learning](#).

Article by Max W. Fischer
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